



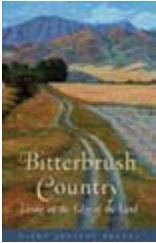
Living in the Modern Rural West Book List

“Living in the Modern Rural West” theme materials were created for Let’s Talk About It by Susan Swetnam, Idaho State University, 2007.

Books:

- *Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land* by Diane Josephy Peavey
- *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* by Annie Proulx
- *Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age* by Susan Swetnam
- *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country* by Kim Barnes
- *The Sky Fisherman* by Craig Lesley
- *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson
- *Traplines: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley* by John Rember
- *Winter Range* by Claire Davis

Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land by Diane Josephy Peavey



In this collection of autobiographical essays (originally read on Idaho Public Radio), Diane Josephy Peavey writes about her life as a rancher and environmentalist in (as she puts it) “the vast, open landscape of south-central Idaho, at once a sanctuary, a source of strength, and a heartache.” Funny, lyrical, and profound, these essays describe sheep-shearing, rodeos, state fairs, and the comic misadventures of a woman who never expected to be a rancher but has fallen in love with the life and the landscape. The essays also speak to the politics of ranching in the west as they describe the ranchers’ struggles against unfavorable government policy and encroaching development. With complexity, vivid detail, and honesty, *Bitterbrush Country’s* vignettes bring readers into the daily life of a rancher. Gretel Ehrlich called Peavey’s writing “lucid and charming, full of the stillness and exuberance of the country she so loves and the man who came with it. Lovely from start to finish.”

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Author Information



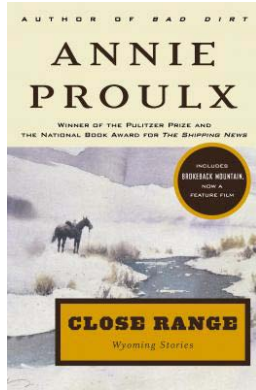
Daughter of noted historian of American Indians Alvin Josephy, Jr., Diane Josephy Peavey spent summers in Joseph, Oregon, although she grew up in the East. After working on the Alaska Lands legislation in Washington D.C. in the late 1970s, then serving as a special assistant at the department of the Interior in Washington, she married Idaho state senator John Peavey, a third-generation owner of a sheep and cattle operation, Flat Top Sheep Company, north of Carey Idaho at the end of a 24-mile dirt road. She has served as Director of the Idaho Rural Council, Literature Director of the Idaho Commission on the Arts, and a correspondent for Idaho Public Radio. She is organizer of the annual Trailing of the Sheep Festival in Ketchum, Idaho. She lives with her family at Flat Top Sheep Company.

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Discussion Questions for Bitterbrush Country

1. Popular stereotypes would suggest that the terms “rancher” and “environmentalist” are incompatible. How does Peavey blend the two in her perspective? Do you see how they can have common aims?
2. “Pain and loss,” *Bitterbrush Country* asserts, “are the constant counterpoint to this beautiful landscape.” What sorts of pain besides the physical does Peavey document in her work? What sorts of loss? What are the compensations?
3. What specific human-caused problems make ranchers’ lives difficult, according to Peavey? Does she offer solutions? Are these problems solvable, do you think?
4. As a transplant, what aspects of the rural western landscape most impress Peavey? Why? Do you see her defining herself in terms of landscape?
5. What are rural westerners like, according to the vignettes in this book? Do you agree?
6. What functions does humor serve in this book? Pick a few places where comedy and a more serious tone are juxtaposed, and discuss how the shift works.
7. Compare Peavey’s perspective as a transplant to the west with John Rember’s perspective on a similar landscape as a native. How are they different? Similar?

Close Range: Wyoming Stories by E. Annie Proulx



Close Range collects eleven short stories set in rural Wyoming, including two O. Henry Prize winners for the year's best short story, "Brokeback Mountain" and "The Mud Below" (both of which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*), and another ("The Half-Skinned Steer") which was chosen for *The Best American Short Stories 1998* and *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999). Proulx's characters are memorable: lonely, stubborn, violent, and usually down-on-

their luck, full of yearning. On ranches and in small towns, on the rodeo circuit and in bars and menial jobs, they look for love, for stability, for something to give their lives meaning, but their fates play out darkly, in most cases. The huge empty landscape of Wyoming is a vivid presence in this book, the stage for great and small human tragedies. The stories are full of vivid, gritty details about contemporary western life; of their style, one reviewer said, "every single sentence surprises and delights and just bowls you over."

Author Information

(Edna) Annie Proulx was nearly 60 years old when her second novel, *The Shipping News*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for fiction in 1994. She was born in 1935 in Connecticut to parents of French-Canadian ancestry, was educated at Colby College and Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. She began her career as a journalist, then began publishing stories in the 1970s and 1980s. After her first novel appeared, in 1992, she was awarded NEA and Guggenheim fellowships. She has won many prizes for her work (including The New Yorker Book Award Best Fiction 1999 for *Close Range*); "Brokeback Mountain" was made into a movie in 2005 and was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning three. She is divorced and has three children. She has lived in Wyoming since 1994, spending part of the year in Newfoundland.

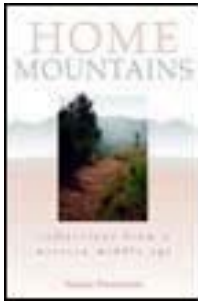


Annie Proulx
Photographed by Karen Cipolla
Bad Dirt, Scribner

Discussion Questions for Close Range: Wyoming Stories

1. Most of these characters' lives are unhappy. How much effect do factors beyond their control play in their fates: their upbringing, their class, their luck? How much of their suffering is their own fault? Could some of these stories have ended differently?
2. What role does the Wyoming landscape play here, as agent in the stories and as symbol? Is this a specifically "Wyoming," or "western" book, or could these people live in any rural area?
3. Compare the women characters with the men. Do the women seem any more, or less resilient? Self-directed? Self-destructive? The majority of these stories have male lead characters, vs. female, though Proulx is a woman. Does that seem significant or appropriate in some way to you?
4. What makes these characters tick? What motivates them, what do they want, what do they fear? Are they universal in these respects, or particularly "western" in some way?
5. Do you feel empathy for these characters? Why or why not?
6. Which of these stories seem particularly well-constructed as stories to you, in terms of plot, character, style, etc.? What is it about these stories that made them so critically admired, do you think?
7. One reviewer noted that the stories don't simply repeat each other, but afford subtle mood changes, playing the themes out "in eleven different keys." Do you agree? What are those overarching themes, and how do individual stories build and expand them?

Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age by Susan Swetnam



After a youth spent in the East in quiet discontent, Susan Swetnam writes about the middle-age surprise of finding herself at home in southeastern Idaho. The book's autobiographical essays chronicle her attempts to come to terms with various "homes"—with the beautiful expanses and sometimes quirky occupants of the Intermountain West, but also with life choices, with family, with love, with responsibility, and with the need to keep adapting to life's ongoing changes. Essay topics range from the surprise of winning a blue ribbon at the Eastern Idaho State Fair, to mountain rambling, to fighting fires, to accepting the blessings of a love which can only be temporary. Youth is hardly the apex of life, Swetnam concludes; middle age, too, can be a time of deep satisfaction, a time of dawning self-realization. *Home Mountains* was honored by the Idaho Library Association in 2000.

Author Information



Susan Swetnam was born in Philadelphia in 1950 and educated at the University of Delaware and the University of Michigan. She came to Idaho in 1979 to teach at Idaho State University. A professor of English and a writer, she has published essays and articles in a wide variety of national, regional, and literary magazines, including *Gourmet*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Black Canyon Quarterly*. She won a writer's residency from Washington State's Espy Foundation in 2004. In addition to *Home Mountains*, she has published book-length studies of Mormon pioneer life story writing and of Idaho writer Grace Jordan, as well as a collection of personal essays about teaching (*My Best Teachers Were Saints*, 2006). She has been active in public humanities programming in Idaho, including Let's Talk About It programs for more than twenty years, as was her late husband, poet Ford Swetnam.

Discussion Questions for Home Mountains

1. What does Swetnam see in the landscape of southeast Idaho that helps her define herself?
2. Some of this book's essays are retrospective, looking back at periods when the writer had not yet discovered Idaho. How do they fit into the book's overall themes?
3. The book's first essay, "On Entering the Eastern Idaho State Fair," concludes "and I am home." And yet that essay has shown that the writer still recognizes herself as an outsider in the human landscape of the Fair. In what sense, then, is she "home?"
4. Though a few of the essays in this book are about family, this book suggests that Swetnam is more disengaged from birth family than many writers in this series. What constitutes "family" for her? How can a person be "home" in a place if no blood relations live there?
5. Which of these essays round and complicate conventional pictures of the West and Westerners? Which would confirm such pictures?
6. How does the perspective that an immigrant like Swetnam brings to a place differ from the perspective of a native? Does one necessarily see a place differently, or better, than another?
7. In the introduction, Swetnam writes that "middle age . . . is about finding the sort of grounding that makes living possible." What sorts of "grounding" does the book suggest that she's found? Do you agree that middle age is an especially fruitful time for self-definition?

In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country by Kim Barnes

In the Wilderness is a memoir about growing up in the isolated logging camps of North Idaho during the 1960s, a work about family and identity. Kim Barnes' parents moved from the Oklahoma dustbowl to North Idaho, where her father became a logger and the family lived a modest but happy life. Then, in the economic downturn on the 1960s and with mechanization, loggers' jobs began disappearing. Barnes' father was determined to stay on, however, and the family sought community and consolation in a Pentecostal sect. This conversion had a profound effect on the family, influencing everything from dress to gender roles to fundamental assumptions about the world. At first docile, Barnes rebelled as an adolescent.

Full of anecdotal detail, uncompromising and painful, the memoir depicts a young woman's struggles to discover who she is. It traces a passage into, as Barnes has written, "a wilderness that was something other than physical: the wilderness brought on by physical isolation; the wilderness that is the sexuality of a young girl coming of age in such an isolated environment; and the wilderness of our souls, from which our church helped to save us." Admitting that she still carries "resentment and bitterness," Barnes nevertheless demonstrates in this narrative that she "can live in the wilderness and outside of it, that I can embrace the whole." The book's ending depicts the narrator's return to the beloved woods of her youth. *In the Wilderness* was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 1997.

Author Information

Kim Barnes was born in 1958 in North Idaho and grew up in isolated logging camps. In the mid-1960s, her family joined the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Pierce, becoming members of a fundamentalist sect related to snake-handlers. Barnes was a rebellious adolescent, and after her graduation from Lewiston High School (as a member of the National Honor Society) she held a variety of jobs. In the early 1980s, she enrolled in Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, studying English. There she met her husband, the poet and professor Robert Wrigley.

Barnes currently teaches at the University of Idaho and writes poetry, short stories, and memoir. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary magazines, including *Shenandoah* and *The Georgia Review*. She is co-editor with Mary Blew of *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. In addition to *In the Wilderness*, she is also author of a second memoir, *Hungry for the World*, and several novels. She lives in Moscow, Idaho, with her husband and two children.

Discussion Questions for *In the Wilderness*

1. Barnes has written that the family's early life was "short on material wealth, but long on the riches of family and friends, and the great sheltering power of the wilderness." In what sense(s) was the young girl "sheltered" by the wilderness? How does that relationship help explain the book's ending?
2. Why do you think that Barnes' family turned to fundamentalism? What did the sect give them that was lacking, or that they wanted, in their lives?
3. How does entering the church change their lives? Does it make sense to you that the young girl at first embraces this new orientation with her parents?
4. Why does she rebel? Do you, as a reader, have sympathy for her rebellion?
5. What are some of the ways that you might define "wilderness," as the term is used in this book? How do these various sorts of wildernesses help the narrator to "shape [her] heart and soul" and "face [her] demons," as one book description puts it?
6. Barnes told an interviewer that "personal nonfiction destabilizes. It redefines the present, and tells us how to act now." She has also written, "I want to trace my own journey as I remember and then remake my past." In what respect does a writer of memoir necessarily "remake" the past? How could such an act "redefine the present?"
7. Barnes makes it clear that she has turned her back on her parents' fundamentalism. Is this book's narrator still a person of faith? In what?

The Sky Fisherman by Craig Lesley

The Sky Fisherman is a boy's coming of age story, set in a Northwest river town; it is full of drama, river and fishing stories, rural humor, and American Indian lore. The main character, Culver, lives with his widowed mother; his father drowned in a boating accident while on the fabled Lost River with his Uncle Jake, a guide. As the novel begins, Culver's mother is shedding her feckless arsonist second husband to return to the town where Jake lives; the guide becomes Culver's surrogate father. After a young Indian man's apparent drowning is revealed to be murder and a terrible fire threatens to engulf the entire town, Culver's world grows darker, and secrets about race relations, betrayals, and Uncle Jake's own past end his innocence. During a dramatic flood, Culver comes to understand forgiveness and gains the healing that he needs to survive.

Author Information

Craig Lesley earned a B. A. from Whitman College and M.A. at the University of Kansas and settled in Portland, Oregon in 1970 to teach English and creative writing at Clackamas Community College. With the help of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, he earned his MFA at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. His first novel, *Winterkill*, the story of a Native American rodeo rider, was published in 1984 by Houghton Mifflin. His second, *River Song*, is a sequel. *The Sky Fisherman*, Lesley's third novel, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He calls it his favorite novel. Lesley's fourth novel, *Storm Riders*, won an Oregon Book Award and is based on the true story of Lesley's family's attempt to help a young Indian boy damaged by fetal alcohol syndrom and abandoned by his parents. Lesley has also edited two anthologies of short stories and has published his own stories in various little and literary magazines. He has served as the chair of creative writing at Willamette University and as Writer in Residence at Whitman College and Portland State University. He lives with his wife and daughters in Portland.

Discussion Questions for The Sky Fisherman

1. Culver has mixed feelings about his mother throughout the book. How are those typical of the ones that any boy of his age might have, and how are they distinctive to his family situation?
2. How does living near Jake change his life? Do you see him copying Jake as a role model? How?
3. What symbolic role(s) does the river play in the book? Is it distinctive enough to be called a “character?” Does what you decide help explain why Jake feels so at home there?
4. How does the book depict Native Americans? Does the portrait seem fair and rounded to you? What does their presence add to the narrative?
5. The novel has a great deal to say about how men in the rural west relate to each other. What assumptions and values seem to govern these interactions? Is there a “code of the rural west” implied in this book?
6. Lesley uses the archetypes of fire and water liberally in this book. What do those add to the narrative? Do you like the use of them?
7. What does Culver learn about life by the novel’s end? Has he matured, do you think? What do you make of the ending, where he looks up into the sky and imagines his family there, saving a place for him?

Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson

Snow Falling on Cedars is a novel of about love, prejudice, family, friendship, and ethics. Its plot is framed around a courtroom drama which occurs shortly after World War II: the trial of a Japanese man for the murder of his white neighbor and former high school classmate. Both men are salmon fishermen, operating off San Pedro Island (a stand-in for Washington State's Bainbridge Island); they are also linked by their competing ties to a piece of the island's rich strawberry land. Tension runs high during the trial, fed by racial antagonism and war memories; the island's Japanese community is also angry over recent exile to internment camps, which their neighbors did nothing to stop.

The novel's center of consciousness, newspaper man Ishmael Chambers, is himself a man divided: he was in love as a boy with Hatsue Miyamoto, wife of the accused, and has never forgiven her for leaving him; he also lost an arm in a Pacific battle; and yet he is sympathetic to the island's Japanese, aware of the injustices done them. The plot's mystery is beautifully handled, full of suspense, with a perfectly-timed resolution. The book's examination of human interactions, through its examination of betrayal and need and indebtedness and basic human decency, make it so evocative.

Snow Falling on Cedars won many awards, including the 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award, and it was made into a movie in 1999, directed by Scott Hicks. An excellent reading group site relative to this book is maintained by Vintage Books at www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/snow. It contains a summary of plot and themes, background on Japanese settlement in the West and internment, and extensive questions for discussion.

Author Information

David Guterson was born in Seattle in 1956; his father was a distinguished criminal defense lawyer. He received his M.A. from the University of Washington, evolving his philosophy that, while fiction "shouldn't dictate to people what their morality should be," writers have a "very important obligation" to present "moral questions for reflection."

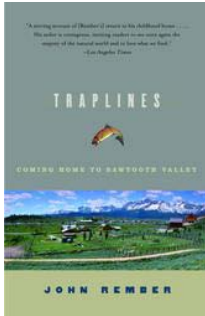
Guterson first taught high school English but is now a full-time writer, living on Bainbridge Island with his wife and four children. In addition to *Snow Falling on Cedars*, he has also published *The Drowned Son* (1996), *East of the Mountains* (1999), and *Our Lady of the Forest* (2003), along with a collection of short stories (*The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind* [1989]) and a book in praise of homeschooling (*Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* [1992]). His sister Mary Guterson is also a novelist (*We Are All Fine Here*, 2005).

Discussion Questions for *Snow Falling on Cedars*

1. How does the novel's rural island setting affect the interaction of its characters? "Identity was geography instead of blood," says Ishmael at one point (p. 206). What does he mean by that?
2. How (besides the war) can you account for the distance between the Japanese and their neighbors? Why doesn't anybody defend them when they are ordered to the internment camps?
3. Why are Ishmael and Hatsue drawn to each other? Why does she eventually turn her back on him? Why does he decide to help her husband, if he's so angry at her?
4. What is the significance of the snowstorm? How does it influence the plot? How does it function metaphorically?
5. How has experience in World War II shaped novel's male characters? We expect war to harden people, but here it seems to ultimately lead to empathy for many characters. Does that make sense to you?
6. Do the characters in this book take their identity from the landscape around them? Is their relationship with it "western" in ways that you can define?
7. What "moral questions for reflection" does this novel raise? Does it suggest any answers?

Traplines: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley

by John Rember



In this memoir, John Rember recounts his experiences of growing up in the Sawtooth Valley at a time when fish were wild in the rivers and electric light seemed magical. His father was a trapper/fishing guide, and everyone in his family—including his mother—hunted. After he moved back home as an adult in 1987, Rember realizes that those same experiences no longer seem to possess the authenticity that they once did. The rural West, he discovers, has been transformed, both as a place to live and as a terrain of the imagination.

Funny, beautiful, and philosophical, this book weaves memories and reflections into an anecdotal narrative which displays deep affection for place and family. Not only has the place where he grew up changed, he realizes, but he has, too. Reviewers called *Traplines* “a requiem, of sorts, for one of the last best places,” a “voyage to self-consciousness,” and “a captivating and contemplative look at how we have evolved our communities in the rural West.”

Author Information



John Rember is a fourth-generation Idahoan who was born in Sun Valley and grew up in the Sawtooth Valley. His mother was a nurse, his father drove a ski bus and worked as a miner, fishing and hunting guide, trapper, and mechanic. Rember was educated at Harvard and earned an MFA at the University of Montana.

He has written numerous articles, stories, and essays for publications ranging from *Travel and Leisure* to *Skiing Magazine* to *Wilderness Conservation*, and his work has been often anthologized. In addition to *Traplines* (which was named Idaho Book of the Year in 2004 by the Idaho Library Association), he has published two short story collections, *Cheerleaders from Gomorrah: Tales from the Lycra Archipelago*, and *Coyote in the Mountains*. He is Writer-in-Residence at Albertson College of Idaho and teaches in the Pacific University MFA program in Forest Grove, Oregon. He lives in the Sawtooth Valley with his wife. His website is www.johnremember.com.

Discussion Questions for *Traplines*

1. In *Traplines*' first essay, John Rember considers what it means to go "home" to a place that looks like itself but has changed. Even as he calls the new Sawtooth Valley a "museum," he clearly feels "at home" there. Why? What is the same for him, despite all the changes? What makes a place "home?"
2. In what ways were the young Rember's values and attitudes shaped by his rural western upbringing (both by absorbing his family's values and reacting against them)?
3. The book's world is full of people who keep their own company, including the narrator himself (in the essay titled "Solo" and elsewhere). What draws them to solitude? Does the quality of their solitude seem somehow "western" to you?
4. What does it mean to be a "local" in this book? Is this simply an exclusive insider's designation, or do the outsiders in the book seem substantially different in the way that they approach life?
5. "Stories are artifice," Rember writes, even as he tells the story of his life. Why, then, tell a story like this?
6. "There is no continuity of self through time . . . but there is continuity of love through time," the book concludes. What does this mean in the context of the narrative? Do you agree?
7. Why is the book called "Traplines?"

Winter Range by Claire Davis



Winter Range, a dark and haunting novel, is set in the cattle-ranching country of north-eastern Montana. Touching on issues of class and isolation, it traces a winter that turns violent when Ike Parsons, a recent immigrant to the region and town sheriff, attempts to help Chas Stubblefield, a cattleman down on his luck and crazed with loneliness and resentment. Ike's own wife Pattiann, the sheriff discovers, was once a wild young woman who kept company with Chas, and she is drawn once again to reach out to Chas. Believing that he has been betrayed by bankers, filled with angry memories of his abusive father, furious at others whose lives appear to be contented, Chas is in the process of killing his own cattle as the novel begins. By the end, he will have killed more than livestock.

Winter Range won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association prize for Best First Novel in 2001.

Author Information



Claire Davis has told an interviewer that she was an avid reader who began writing stories as soon as she could write, continuing the lives of characters because she could not bear to see books end. She was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, then lived as a young married woman on a small farm outside Milwaukee. In her thirties, she returned to writing. She earned a degree from the writing program at the University of Montana in the early 1990s and now teaches at Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho.

Her work has appeared in many literary magazines, including the *Southern Review* and the *Gettysburg Review*, and her stories have appeared in Pushcart anthologies. In addition to *Winter Range*, she is also the author of another novel, *Skin of the Snake* (2005), and a collection of short stories, *Labors of the Heart* (2006).

Discussion Questions for *Winter Range*

1. Though Ike is well-liked and holds an important office in town, he is still an outsider. What does “outsider” mean in a small western town like this story’s setting? What are the disadvantages of being an outsider? Any advantages?
2. What motives Chas to let his cattle starve, or to shoot them? How do the roots of his actions stretch back into his childhood, in addition to the more recent developments that he cites? Do you have any compassion for him?
3. Why was Pattiann so angry in her youth? Why might she have married Ike? Toward the novel’s end, she asserts that she is now happy with her life. Do you believe her? If so, why does she reach out to Chas?
4. Davis once agreed with an interviewer that *Winter Range* is “a story of community.” What sorts of communities do you see here (human and beyond), and what conclusions does the novel suggest, if any, about how communities operate, or should operate?
5. How does the harsh winter landscape function in the novel, both practically and metaphorically?
6. In what ways is this a novel about social class? About belonging or not belonging?
7. *Winter Range* ends darkly. How do you interpret what happens? Does it suggest anything more general about what it’s like to live in the modern rural west? Do you agree?